

A Century of Song: The Evolution of Musical Theatre Music

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

The art of musical theatre is constantly changing. Throughout its century of existence, the musical has taken many forms and so has its music. The music in musical theatre has always been in a constant state of evolution. Early musical theatre music was influenced by ragtime and operetta. As jazz gained popularity in the 20s and 30s, it dominated Broadway. By the 1940s, music's focus was not to merely entertain but to help further the plot. Music of this era was still influenced by jazz, but Broadway had already developed its own sound. In the 1960s and 1970s, composers began exploring other genres of music, especially rock. By the 1990s, Broadway's biggest hits had a contemporary pop sound, although the traditional Broadway sound can still be heard. This project involved a recital of selections from all eras of musical theatre presented in Pruis Hall on April 15, 2012. Pieces represented various composers, musical styles, and subject matter.

Acknowledgements

I would like first to thank my advisor, Michael Elliott. His constant support and knowledge was instrumental in the development of this thesis. Without him, the singing of so many songs in such a short period of time would have been impossible.

Secondly, I would like to thank Erin Oechsel who sang in the recital and Hyunyoung Hwang who accompanied. Their time, talent, and dedication were invaluable.

Thirdly, I would like to thank Laurel Hill for her help with the creation of the poster and program as well as constantly reminding me that I could accomplish this daunting task.

Fourthly, I would like to thank my parents, Gus and Dianne Pickerill, for helping with expenses related to the project.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Pruis Hall for their assistance in providing a space for the recital.

Author's Statement

In the original approach to this recital, I simply wanted to give a presentation of songs from the musical theatre cannon. In preliminary talks with my advisor, it was quickly determined that the songs should have some reason for being together in a recital other than that I enjoy singing them. It was decided that the songs would be presented chronologically. The recital would present the basic evolution of musical theatre music, from its development in the early nineteenth century to the present, representing many of the major composers of musical theatre. Vocal, musical, and acting choices would reflect the style intended of the composer and lyricist and that no attempt to modernize the songs would be made. This statement will defend the songs chosen for the recital in terms of their historical importance and musical relevance.

This first song that was sung is titled "Play a Simple Melody," written by Irving Berlin for the musical review *Watch Your Step* in 1914 (Knapp 35). At this time, Broadway was dominated by follies and musical reviews. These shows had little to no story and today would seem more like variety shows than a piece of musical theatre. This piece was chosen due to its musical influences, the classic sound of the nineteenth century popular song and ragtime, a precursor to jazz. Both of these sounds were common on Broadway in the 1910s (Knapp 40). The song also represents an Irving Berlin signature, counterpoint. Counterpoint is the musical term for two melodies occurring simultaneously that do not conflict harmonically. This musical style is rare in musical theatre, but can still be found in contemporary musicals such as "What is This Feeling" from *Wicked* (Knapp 42). I chose to accompany myself on the piano primarily to create an interesting stage picture to begin the recital.

By the 1920s and 30s, jazz dominated Broadway. Many songs of this era became jazz standards and singers like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra took Broadway's hit songs out of their original context and made them their own. I chose to present my own spin on songs of the 1930s and 1940s while still maintaining the composer's original musical intent by presenting an original medley of Broadway songs that became jazz standards. Three songs were chosen that represented three different composers. These songs were "One for My Baby" by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, "I Could Write a Book" by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and "Embraceable You" by George and Ira Gershwin. All of these songs have had substantial lives outside the shows for which they were written, representing the trend of making jazz standards out of Broadway tunes. These songs were not presented in their entirety in the medley. "Embraceable You" and "I Could Write a Book" contain a verse, or a section at the beginning of the song that is less well known than the chorus of the song. The chorus is the main portion of the song and has much more public popularity. While presenting the verse would have demonstrated a common musical structure in the 1930s, they did not fit the musical arc of the entire medley and were therefore cut.

A notable exception to the dominant trend of jazz music on Broadway was *Showboat*, a musical written by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern. It was a rarity for its time in that the story or plot drove the show; all elements served the plot rather than vice versa. Kern's music drew from many influences of the era, one of them being operetta. The third piece I sang was entitled "Make Believe," a duet that borrows many musical elements from operetta. "Make Believe" is among the earliest examples of Hammerstein's conditional ballad, also called an almost love song. Conditional ballads

are love song sung between two people who are not currently in love. I chose to present this song with the scene that precedes it to give the audience a bit of context and to help establish the relationship between the two characters.

The next set of pieces came from the Golden Age of Musical Theatre, which lasted roughly from 1943 to 1964. This was the age of the integrated book musical where the song and dance served to further the plot, much like in *Showboat*. This type of complete integration in a musical was developed by Rodgers and Hammerstein in *Oklahoma!*. A later example of this type of musical was *South Pacific*, also by Rodgers and Hammerstein. While it was not revolutionary in form, it was so revolutionary in its exploration of racism that the musical won a Pulitzer Prize. The issue of racism was confronted in the song “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught,” my fourth piece. This song was chosen not for its musical style, but rather its content, which was ground breaking in that it directly faced a current social issue.

My next piece is called “So in Love” from *Kiss Me, Kate* by Cole Porter. Perhaps most famous for his musicals of the 1930s, including *Anything Goes*, one of his most successful shows was *Kiss Me, Kate*. Cole Porter made frequent use of a musical style called the beguine. Like the waltz, the beguine originated from a dance. The beguine is a social dance from French Martinique (Knapp 38). “So in Love” is a love ballad in the style of a beguine, a song type common in all eras of musical theatre. Another piece I chose to sing, “If Ever I Would Leave You” from *Camelot* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, is also an example of the love ballad. Both songs have a repeat in the music that I chose not present, primarily for time.

Another common Broadway song type is the “I want song.” In this type of song the character tells the audience what they want. It exists in nearly every era of musical theatre. The last song I sang from the Golden Age is called “Something’s Coming” from *West Side Story*. This song is also the perfect example of the blending of music and lyrics to tell a story. Both elements cleverly work together to inform the audience what the character is thinking and doing. The music is also never resolved, which creates an anticipation that does not end with the song.

Moving into the modern era of musical theatre, the next song, entitled “Corner of the Sky” from *Pippin* by Stephen Schwartz, is another example of an “I want song,” but is filled with longing as opposed to anticipation. In the third era of musical theatre, composers and writers began experimenting with the form of the musical. One of these new forms was the introduction of rock music to the Broadway stage. “Corner of the Sky” is an example of 1970s folk rock. The song was sung in its entirety.

The next song, called “Being Alive,” is from Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Company*. Stephen Sondheim, one of the greatest innovators, pioneered the concept musical, a type of musical that explores an idea or concept in a way that does not necessarily tell a linear story (Kantor 314). *Company* explores the concept of marriage. The song “Being Alive” is about the main character’s thoughts and opinions of marriage. This song is an example of Sondheim’s signature style, which makes frequent use of dissonance. The version used in the recital was from the 1995 Broadway revival.

The next selection in the program is called “All I Care About” from *Chicago* by Fred Ebb and John Kander. This musical used music from an earlier time, a time relevant to the historical setting of the musical rather than a contemporary musical sound. Since

the show is set in 1920s Chicago, the music is in the style of the early jazz of the 1920s.

This song was truncated due to time.

The final song from this innovative era is called “Empty Chairs at Empty Tables” from a show that helped launch musical theatre into the contemporary era, *Les Misérables*. This show combined many of the elements explored in the 1970s and early 1980s with other styles of musical theatre story telling. *Les Misérables* has a pop sound, is sung all the way through with no spoken text like an opera, and tells a linear story.

The contemporary era in musical theatre, shows produced within the last 20 to 25 years, provides a mixture of old and new. Many hits have been revivals, while original musicals look to popular culture for stories and style. No longer does Broadway define popular music like it did in the 1920s; popular music is defining Broadway. The next song is from an Off-Broadway musical called *Songs for a New World* and is written by Broadway composer Jason Robert Brown. His music certainly reflects contemporary pop and with a strong jazz influence. This musical is a song-cycle musical, not unlike the musical reviews at the beginning of the 20th century. The key difference though is that all the songs tell stories, even if they are all unrelated. I chose a duet from this show to highlight the composer’s skill in writing beautiful vocal lines.

The next selection, “I’m Not That Smart” from *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is actually the most recent. Although an effort was made to maintain chronological order, some pieces were moved within the era for aesthetic reasons. The show tells the story of a spelling bee where contestants are awkward pre-teenagers. The songs reflect the whimsical nature of young children and are of a style that is difficult to define. It is certainly influenced by both pop and a more traditional musical theatre

sound but each song is unique to the show and greatly loses its meaning when pulled out of context of the show, much like Sondheim's pieces.

The second to last piece is a ballad called "Breeze Off the River" from *The Full Monty*, an example of a recent trend in musical theatre of producing musical versions of films. Again, Broadway seems to be reflecting popular culture, rather than creating it. Because of the musical's setting in the 1980s, *The Full Monty*'s score is influenced by 80s rock and pop. I chose to play this song to create a bookend with the first piece that I played.

The final song of the program is called "This is the Moment" from *Jekyll and Hyde* by Frank Wildhorn, a composer known for his pop power ballads. It is perhaps one of his best, and certainly one of his most well-known. When compared to "Play a Simple Melody," there are many notable differences. "This is the Moment" is longer, has a greater vocal range, the chord structure is different, and has a stronger dramatic arc and musical build.

The pieces chosen to perform represent many different styles, content, and dramatic structure in the evolution of musical theatre. It is important to note that I looked primarily at mainstream Broadway trends with a few notable exceptions, such as "Make Believe" from *Showboat*. I did not include any of the rare musicals that make use of non-western music such as *Pacific Overtures* or *The Lion King* nor did I include songs written for other genders or races. This was not intended to promote one type of music over the other, but rather, to narrow the source material to manageable proportions. The pieces chosen demonstrate major Broadway musical trends and how they evolved over the last century.

These songs challenged me as an artist and singer. The program consisted of a balance of new pieces as well as songs I had already prepared in my repertoire. The effort and dedication required to build the vocal technique and stamina has been a fulfilling and enriching endeavor. Singing in a wide variety of styles required me to learn very specifically what each one demanded, so that distinct stylistic changes could be made from song to song. This project was a rewarding experience as a student and a singer, and has helped me to become a more dynamic and collaborative artist.

Works Cited

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- Knapp, Raymond, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

A Century of Song



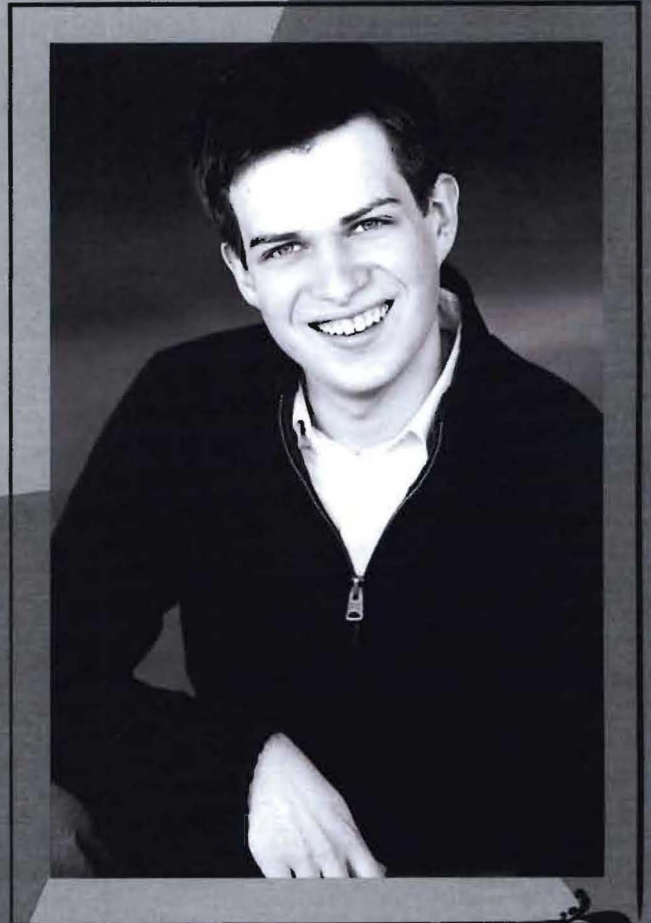
Sunday, April 15th 1:30pm
Pruis Hall

a cabaret by
Andy Pickerill
vocalist

featuring
Erin Oechsel
vocalist

&

Hyunyoung Hwang
accompanist



**This event is free of charge

A Note from Andy

The art of musical theatre is an ever-changing one. Throughout its century of existence, the musical has taken many forms and so has its music. In general, the evolution was relatively linear, but composers have always returned to older Broadway musical styles. Early musical theatre music was influenced by ragtime and operetta. Writers of operetta, like Gilbert and Sullivan, had a huge influence on the creation of the musical and the sound it would have. As jazz gained popularity in the 20s and 30s, it dominated Broadway or perhaps Broadway dominated jazz. America's great songwriters, like the Gershwin brothers, were writing for Broadway, but their tunes were all over the radio. By the 1940s, thanks to Rodgers and Hammerstein, music's main purpose in a musical was to further the play. Music of this era was still influenced by jazz, but Broadway had already developed its own sound. In the 1960s and 1970s, composers began exploring other genres of music, especially rock. Broadway began mimicking popular music, rather than creating it. By the 90s, Broadway's biggest hits had a contemporary pop sound; although, the traditional Broadway sound can still be heard on the Great White Way. It is important to note that in this recital I am only looking at mainstream Broadway trends. There have been many smaller movements in Broadway's history that cannot all be explored in an hour long recital. I hope you enjoy listening to this century of songs as much as I have enjoyed singing them.

Enjoy!
Andy Pickerill

Andy Pickerill in collaboration with the Ball State Honors College
and the Department of Theatre and Dance presents

A Century of Song

The Evolution of Musical Theatre Music

Soloist: Andy Pickerill
Featuring: Hyunyoung Hwang, pianist
Erin Oechsel, vocalist
Faculty Advisor: Michael Elliott

Special Thanks

Laurel Hill
Pruis Hall
Dianne and Gus Pickerill
Erin Oechsel
Hyunyoung Hwang
Michael Elliott

There will be no intermission.

Pruis Hall
Sunday, April 15th, 2012
1:30 p.m.



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